



NATURE OF THE COLONIAL STATE AND LABOUR MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

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Abstract:

In Assam, the European capitalists- particularly planters received the immense support of the entire colonial state in the form legal framework. During the initial stages of 19th century, the colonial state in the Assam province handing over the tea plantation establishment to the capitalists (British). The most significant aspect of the colonial state was its attitude towards the planters vis-a-vis the labourers. Nevertheless, the growth of labour movement in Assam is closely attached with the nature and role of the colonial state. Legislative interventions of the colonial state to regulate 'planters-labourers' relations led to the emergence of dissatisfaction among the labourers in some aspects. The colonial state also provided indirect support to form the nexus between bureaucratic officials and planters. Later, all these attitude and nature of the colonial state towards the labourers led to the growth of labour mobilization in the different tea gardens of Assam. Tea industry was followed by the development of Oil industry in the province during the course of time that has also been also witnessing a number of labour mobilizations. Remarkable changes occurred in the political context of India after the independence. The administration of the country was transferred to the natives from the colonial government and the new welfare state was introduced to meet the basic needs of the general masses. However, the problem that persists with the organized sectors mainly the tea plantation remains same even under the post colonial state and the labourer's resistance continued in the post independence period.

Key Words: European-Capitalists, State, Tea Industry, Labour, Movement, Politics.

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3.1: INTRODUCTION:

The Treaty of Yandabo (1826) marked the beginning of British colonial rule established in the North-East India. The discovery of Tea, Coal and Oil extractions, more particularly, expansion of tea plantation manifested the beginning of industrialization in the colonial province of Assam and integrated the region with the global economy, more particularly in the context of imperialism/colonialism. The working class (wage labour) was found in Assam in a period when it witnessed the transition of her economy from agriculture to industrialization, as it was taking place in England. Although the presence of working population can be seen in Assam since the Ahom period, this was in the context self-sufficient economy and the concept of wage labour was absent at that time.

After the annexation of the Assam province by Britishers the colonial state had played a pivotal role in providing assistance for the setting up and growth of Tea plantations, Coal, Oil industries in the Assam valley from its inception till the end of the colonial rule and recruited a huge number of labourers from the densely populated areas of North India. Later, these recruited groups of working population formed the 'labour class' in the province. But with the passage of time labour mobilization was recorded in the province and these mobilizations was basically against the planters supported by the colonial state.

On the 15th of August, 1947, the administration of the country was transferred to the natives from the colonial government and the new welfare state was introduced to meet the basic needs of the general masses. However, the labour movement and periodic struggles for better living conditions, a feature of the colonial past remains a feature of the politics of Assam after independence too.

An attempt has been made in this paper to study the role and attitude of the colonial state to the genesis and growth of labour mobilization in Assam in the organized sectors, more particularly tea plantation. The paper also tries to study the relationship between labour movement and the politics of the state. The study is based on both primary data and secondary data. Some Archival documents along with already published literature were taken up to assemble information on labour movement.

3.2: NATURE AND ROLE OF THE COLONIAL STATE TO FOSTERING PLANTATION & GROWTH OF LABOUR MOVEMENT IN ASSAM



In Assam, the European capitalists, particularly the planters and oil monopolies were enjoying the immense support of the entire colonial state machinery in the form legal framework. (*Banerjee:2005, pp.28-29*). The colonial state had played a pivotal role in providing assistance for the setting up and growth of different industries in the Assam valley. In the context of its initial setting up of organized sector industries and recruitment of wage labour in the province, it is pertinent to discuss the tea plantation sector first. During the initial stages of the 19th century, the colonial state in the Assam province handed over the tea plantation establishment to British capitalists, (*Behal:2014, p.141*) and provided all possible assistance to them to further develop and expand it. The assistance of the colonial state was particularly important in the context of the mobilization and control of the labourers and building of infrastructure to promote the interests of the tea industry. Moreover, industrial manifestations in the province began by framing of a series of *Land Grant Rule* from 6 March, 1838 onwards, (*Guha: 1977*) that gave access to vast tracts of forest land or wastelands at extremely lucrative terms for commercial cultivation of tea in the province. (*Behal:2014, p.141*).

Thus, the industrial manifestation, more particularly the tea industry (plantation), in Assam opened up new avenues for the investment of Britain's capital. But capital and management are just two aspects of an industry. Plantations, being labour intensive required a constant supply of labour. But the planters' community faced an acute shortage of labour. At first Chinese labourers were imported for work in the plantations but they were too expensive and troublesome. They were dispensed with in 1843 and till 1859 the planters tried to recruit indigenous labourers in the plantation. (*Bhowmick: 2015, p.539*). In order to ensure a flush of the indigenous people into the plantations as wage labour, Thus, the planters community advocated the government in 1859 to further enhance the land revenue rates so that poor peasants could be flushed out of their villages to work for wages on the plantations. Another recommendation of theirs was to put a ban on the cultivation and sale of opium, the widespread consumption of which was believed to have made the local people indifferent towards work (*Guha: 1977,p.7*). The colonial government also responded favorably to all these and ordered an increase in land tax ranging between 15 to 30 per cent on the dry crop lands of four districts - Lakhimpur, Sibsagar, Darrang and Nowgaon (*Borpujari:1980, p.205*).

Thus, in this situation, although Kachari tribe's labourers were recruited for doing service in the tea gardens, these native workers proved too inactive and the remaining local agrarian communities did not find the terms of employment and wages to work on plantations



attractive enough; the consequent shortage of labour to work the plantations led the European authority to think of an alternative source. As a result, the colonial authority gave serious consideration to the import large number of labourers through private contractors i.e. *arkatis* (*Bhowmick: 2015, p.539*) and *sirdars* from the densely populated areas like the Chota Nagpur and later also from other areas such as Bihar, Orissa, Central Provinces and as far as from the Madras Presidency (*Borpujari:1980, p.48; Behal:2017*).

What is important here that through the processes of recruitment, transportation and employment of the labourers, the colonial plantation regimes on behalf of the state were transforming the Indian agrarian communities into labouring '*coolies*'. Thus, during the course of these processes the social, cultural, individual diversities of these (tea labourers) migrant communities were converted into a homogenized term, '*coolie*' used by the planters in the capitalist plantation regime. In the meantime, the colonial state enacted a body of legislations to facilitate labour supply in the province, for instance, *Transport of Native Labours Act, 1863*, *The Inland Emigrant Act, 1893*, *The Assam Labour and Emigration Act, 1901 and 1915*, and finally *Tea Districts Emigrant labour Act, 1932 etc.* (*Sharma:2009, p.1309*).

As a result, in the midst of this process, with the advent of the British in the region, the concept of working class (wage labour) emerged in colonial Assam. Tea industry was followed by the development of Coal and Oil industry in the province during the course of time which also employed a huge number of wage labour.

In Assam, imperialist (capitalists) development got accelerated and shot up to a considerable high level on the eve of the First World War. There are two basic means of imperialist exploitation of the country- one directly by the colonial government and the other through the immediate operations of British Private capital (*Sen: 1997,pp.107-08*). Colonial state is the determinant institution for both of these two means. Thus, the role of the colonial state had to be expanded in the field of industrial establishments. For the development of the tea industry under the monopoly of European Capital, the state utilized public revenues in order to construct necessary infra-structure like roads, railways etc. and to promote the marketing of tea and scientific research on tea plantation. It is necessary to stress here that state assistance was most crucial in the matter of mobilization of labour and regulating labour relations.

However, in the long history of labour relations in the Assam tea plantations, the colonial state, most of the time, did not act as a fair authority between capital and labour while



regulating labour relations. (*Behal:2014, pp.329-33*). The most significant aspect of the role of the state was its attitude towards the planters vis-a-vis the labourers, as reflected in the different labour laws that gave rise to the indenture system in the Assam valley plantation that was an integral part of capitalism in the colonial context.

During the initial decades of this indentured regime, the working conditions of the workers were similar to slavery, with beating, rape, torture and even the throwing of dead workers in the rivers. Another important feature of the indentured plantation regime was the immobilization of mobilized labour i.e. the labourers were confined within the tea gardens. Their freedom of contact with the outside world was curved out by using legal and economic coercion as means to control and immobilization of the labour force. Besides, during the time of indentured regime the labourers had no liberty to withdraw his or her labour power in bargaining over the terms of the contract or for higher wages.

All these features of the indentured regime led to the initiation of new type of slavery. Moreover, the empowerment of planters with the right to private arrest of labour under the panel system (*Behal:2017*) became an important tool in containing labour mobility. In most cases the labourers were given very ruthless punishments even for minor offence, and sometimes even death sentences for violence against the planters. The planters on the other hand, were mostly awarded small monetary fines or released even when the charges were serious, as in some cases that involved the killings of labourers. Moreover, the colonial bureaucracy frequently overlooked the use of extra-legal coercion (force) and extremely ruthless treatment of labourers by the planters and also the “*provincial judiciary acted as an arbitrary, oppressive and radically troubled arm of the colonial state.*” (*Behal: 2017, pp.160-61*).

In case of wage levels of the plantation labour, the European capitalist enterprises continued to extract hard labour at low wages. Along with this, the tea garden workers were under a strict time-bound discipline with difficult work in all kinds of weather having to be done. Unbearably heavy loads of works, poor wages, and being forced to work even when ill, due to the fear of ruthless punishments, characterized the working conditions of the tea garden labourers. These resulted in malnutrition, high rate of sickness, mortality among the migrant labour force under the indenture regime.

In the words of Rana P. Bahel, “*The state often admitted the existence of genuine grievances of labour, like unhealthy living conditions, high rate of mortality, low wages, restrictions on freedom of movement, etc., and flagrant disregard of the labour laws by the*



planters. But no efforts were made to pressurize the employers to redress these grievances and comply with the labour laws.” All these deplorable conditions of the wage earners as well as exploitation against labourers, more particularly the authoritarian nature of the indentured regimes supported by the colonial state led them to resist against their employers in particular and the nature of the colonial state machinery in general.

3.3: EARLY PHASE OF LABOUR MOVEMENT IN ASSAM

The Indian labour movement in its initial stage was confined to the organized industries like factories, plantations, transports, oil and mines. In the context of Assam, it was in the plantation sector, the earliest capitalist enterprise, which witnessed the initial labour resistance in the province. It must, however, be stressed here that these too developed from a spate of unorganized and spontaneous protests; plantation workers could not organize themselves into unions due to their miserable socio-political and economic conditions. (Banerjee: 2005, pp.24-25).

From the very inception of the tea garden workers’ emergence as indentured labourers, they challenged the brutal violence of the planters supported by the colonial state. Labour struggles in the initial periods were linked to the issue of low wages, deplorable working and living conditions, physical and sexual coercion, defending social and cultural rights and preservation of human dignity. (Behal: 2014, pp.331-33). Plantations, which started growing as an industry quite steadily since the mid-nineteenth century under British capital, engaged a huge amount of the working force. The immigrant plantation labourers were the main wage-earning population of the province. The tea garden labourers spent their days in a pathetic and inhuman condition. “The Coolies were in a state of quasi-slavery, no state of recognized slavery could be worse.”(Banerjee:2005,p.27). The exploitation of these ‘coolies’ by the planters could be characterized by ‘slave -master’ relationship.

These exploited plantation workers were the first to raise their voice against their employers and authorities and the history of the working class movement in the state started with the struggle and sacrifice of the tea garden labourers. (Banerjee:2005, pp.27-28).

In the early phase of industrialization in the province, some instances of protests by the labour were recorded in 1848 and 1859 (Guha:1977, pp.12-13). The earliest labour resistance in the province surfaced in the form of ‘absconding’ and ‘desertions’ (Guha:1977, pp. 267-68)



and a few instances of sporadic strikes in the Assam Company's tea estates. The opening up of new plantations in remote and isolated locations in Upper Assam caused great deal of hardship in the daily lives of labourers which was made worse by low and often delayed wage payments.

These experiences built up discontent among the local kachari labourers and led them to the strike in the tea garden in 1848 (*Guha: 1977, p.269*). In 1859, serious 'trouble' started again when kachari labourers who had been recruited from the Darrang district demanded an increase in wages, failing which they demanded that they be allowed to leave the company's service and refused to serve the period of their contract. But, the Company used military to 'control' the situation. Besides, desertion in large numbers was reported in plantations where the indentured regime was in vogue, especially from 1860 onwards. The poor tribals from the Northern Indian states, who had already experienced severe hardship and a sense of alienation from wherever they belonged to as well as the strains of their travel, disease, and high mortality, and the brutalities of daily life on the tea gardens, found desertions to be the only means of escaping the plantation regime. (*Guha: 1977, pp.269-270*).

Along with these, according to the official report of 1904 (*Behal:2014,pp.278-279*) on the relations between planters and labourers in the tea gardens during the past fifteen years (from the report period) submitted by the Govt. of Assam to the Govt. of India, showed continuous friction between the planters and labourers in the tea gardens. A closer scrutiny of the report reveals that the involvement of labourers in acts of violence against the employers and officials was mostly retaliatory as well as collective in nature. Most of the resistance often occurred in solidarity with fellow labourers who were subjected to public indignity and physical coercion by the planters. (*Behal:1977,pp.278-79*).

In several cases the issues of resistance were economic i.e. low wages, denial of rice as a part of wages in kind, extraction of excessive work, etc. and in other cases, it was anger against the physical coercion, confinement, indignities occurred upon labourers and sometime even children, causing injury and occasional death. Thus, before the beginning of the 1900s, and more so by the time of the outbreak of the First World War, labour unrest was recorded in the province.

But these movements were not in an organized way. Illiterate, ignorant, unorganized and isolated from their homes as they were, the plantation workers were weak and powerless against the planters. Alongside, the workers of that period of time fought back at the individual garden level. The forms of struggles varied from desertion and occasional litigation to strikes



and violent mass attacks on the planters. Nevertheless, the resistances of the labourers were occurred against the authoritarian nature of the indentured regimes supported by the colonial state.

2.4: CONCLUSION:

The state (colonial) policies towards capital and labour during the British period proved that colonial state provided all possible aids to the planters in nurturing plantations in Assam. Nevertheless, the growth of labour movement of the state is closely attached with the nature and role of the colonial state. Legislative interventions of the colonial state to regulate 'planters-labourers' relations led to the emergence of dissatisfaction among the labourers in some aspects. The colonial state also provided indirect support to form the nexus between bureaucratic officials and planters. Later, all these attitude and nature of the colonial state towards the labourers led to the growth of labour mobilization in the different tea gardens of Assam. If we see the conditions of labourers in post independent India then it can be said that they have also been facing same problems as they faced in the pre-independent period.

Remarkable changes occurred in the political context of India after the independence. The administration of the country was transferred to the natives from the colonial government and the new welfare state was introduced to meet the basic needs of the general masses. However, the problem that persists with the organized sectors remains same even under the post colonial state and the labourer's resistance continued in the post independence period. Thus, the question arises why labour mobilization has become a regular feature in the political discourse of Assam. There are several reasons put forth for the labour mobilization. The relation between the labour movement and the politics of the state is something that needs deep study to understand the overall nature of the organised sectors in the state of Assam.

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